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Waziristan:

Solutions for a Troubled Region

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Waziristan: Solutions for a Troubled Region

Introduction

The Waziristan region is a main battleground between several factions in the so called 'War on Terror'. Every major actor in this war is also active in this region and which faction controls Waziristan changes every few years. The mix of national interests by the central government of Pakistan, nationalist interests of Pashtuns, strategic considerations by the United States and their allies and the quest for religious and political hegemony by various Islamist factions make Waziristan a perpetual war-zone and probably one of the most dangerous places in the world.

Many reasons for the current situation still stem from British-imperial times and the era of the Great Game. Other factors which abet the situation are legacies from the Afghan-Soviet war between 1979 and 1989.

Looking at the history of the region and its socio-economic situation, I try to evaluate which factors contribute to the unstable situation of today. My main target is to identify potential solutions and consequently how these could be materialized. I do not aim to present solutions on the grounds of liberal and humanitarian ideas, I simply try to present scenarios which could solve the present conflict.

A Brief History

The provinces or agencies North Waziristan and South Waziristan are situated in the relatively autonomous Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA). They take up about the half of FATA and border directly with Afghanistan. The landscape is dominated by the high mountains of the Hindukush and its extreme environment. Whereas most of the region consists of desolate valleys and harsh mountain areas, central Waziristan has a few fertile regions in Birmal, a forest area which supports potato crops, and the Wana plain, where fruits are cultivated. Also the weather is extreme in both directions, extreme heat in summer, mainly in the valleys, and extreme cold and fierce winds in the winter month. The inhabitants of Waziristan are ethnic Pashtuns. They are divided in two tribes, the Wazirs in North Waziristan and the Mahsuds in South Waziristan. The latter were formerly part of the Wazirs, but separated from them during the 18th or 19th century. Historical explanations and tribal legends refer that the Wazirs, which means "minister",

descended from a eastern Afghan tribe, which served the kings of Kabul. Until the 20th century they were also called Darwesh Khel because they are supposed to be descendants of the holy Darwesh Musa. As they are a Pashtun tribe, they also follow their traditional code, the Pashtunwali. This code consists of four main features: tora (courage), badal (revenge), melmastia (hospitality), nanawatee (granting peace to a defeated enemy) and subordination to the jirga, the council of the clans and tribes (Akbar 2004: 16pp.). Although this law seems very rude and antique, vendetta amongst rival clans was and is still quite common, but it was relatively successful in keeping some sort of order under the harsh conditions of the Waziristan area. Women are traditionally marginalised. The society of Waziristan is dominated by the Elders and the male warriors. The aspect of religion in Waziristan is very important. The Wazir tribes are Sunni-Muslims and very strict in their religious behavior, but the Islam is also used as a symbolic and political term in addition to its a theological implication. Concepts like jihad are used in order to achieve economical, social or political goals, for example as a tool in a tribal rivalry. In this tribal culture Islam and the ethnic identity as Pashtun are harmonized or as Ahmed puts it: "[A]s the tribesman himself views it, by examining the relationship in terms of Islam and Pakhtunness and not Islam versus Pakhtunness." (Akbar 2004: 139). The Pashtunwali is operates within Islam, religious and tribal authorities are both important, but the religious leader, although he is an important figure for the tribal identity, still remains subordinate to the Elders. However, Islamist mobilization is not a recent phenomenon in Waziristan, as some research states (Hussain 2007: 147), as shown in the chapter of Ahmed's book "The emergence of the Mullah"(Akbar 2004: 49). The new dimension is the international Jihadism, introduced in the 1980s by foreigners. The mountain area of Waziristan was already used as a base for Mujaheddin going to Afghanistan during the Afghan wars. There a lot of fighters, who had their origins in the small villages of Waziristan. They were trained and armed by the ISI and the CIA, along with Arabic fighters which were recruited for the Jihad against the Soviets . As the Soviets withdrew their troops, many of those fighters settled down in Waziristan and became part of the local population. After the USA and their allies threw the Taliban and Al-Kaida out of Afghanistan following the events in 2001, a lot of fighters fled to Waziristan and were welcomed there (Hussain 2007: 143). Whereas in 2002 these fighters, a lot of the Al-Kaida fighters were in Waziristan at this time, were relatively unharmed by the Pakistani army (The International Herald Tribune, 13 May 2002), the army began to deploy larger amounts of troops to the FATA including the Waziristan agencies (Afghandaily.com, 30 August 2003 and Dawn, 5 September

2003). In 2004 the army was still advancing and launched large operations against the Taliban and Al-Kaida in Waziristan and in the whole tribal belt where they partly worked together with the tribes. But in 2004 the first news of successful day-light ambushes by local militia shows a turn in the events. Whereas the tribes seemed to support the army in the first place, this support decreased and tribal warriors seemed to support the resisting militias. Tribal warriors and foreign militias, mostly Uzbeki, fought together under Taliban leaders like the charismatic Nek Muhammed, who was killed in 2004, against the army. Although tribal warriors fought foreign militias after the death of Nek Muhammed, this did not mean a battle against the Taliban. It was fight of succession within the command structure and between rival militias. In truth the Taliban and their tribal allies, were advancing, so that they and Al-Kaida could announce that they virtually seized the control of the whole North Waziristan agency in 2006 and declared the "Islamic state". In 2007 and 2008 the Army of Pakistan unsuccessfully tried to pacify the territory, famously in the battle of the Swat Valley (Spiegel, 22 November 2007) and the Operation Zalzala (Daily Times, 20 May 2008).

Current Situation

Since 2009 Waziristan is a basically a battlefield on which the Pakistani Army, the US, especially the CIA and the Taliban and other extremists fight each other. While the army had some successes in purging the Swat Valley from insurgents, even being able to reopen schools (The Guardian, 26 June 2012), most areas of Waziristan remain embattled. The Taliban and the Haqqani network, an extremist group based in Waziristan (GlobalSecurity.org), continue to attack security forces in the fight for control over the region. Their activities, like bombings of military and civilian installations, are a constant reminder of their ability to commence offensive operations (The New Yorker, 24 December 2011; Dawn, 8 January 2012). Additionally, the US military and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) conduct frequent unmanned aerial attacks on supposed militants, killing not only the targeted militants, but also civilians in the course of these actions (Dawn, 13 March 2012; The Express Tribune, 5 May 2012). These attacks are on the one hand successful in killing militant leaders in the Waziristan area, but the high numbers of civilian casualties, on the other hand, drive locals into joining the ranks of the militant groups in order to fight the Allied Forces in Afghanistan.

Analysis

The current situation is highly problematic. The involvement of so many different groups: Taliban militias, tribal militias, foreign fighters, Pakistani security and military forces, U.S. Army Special Forces and CIA drone activities as well as Afghan border forces, make it virtually impossible to formulate and implement a clear strategy to pacify Waziristan effectively. The often blurry lines between tribal forces and Islamist militants make the identification of targets a gambling procedure and the nearly inevitable deaths of civilians complicates the situation even more, since those deaths mostly contribute to the alienate the local population.

But what contributed to this situation? The impossibility to establish state structures, both, by the British and the Pakistani, left Waziristan behind in economical, political and social terms. The area, like the whole of NWFP and FATA, is a backwards border area where living standards are very low and civic rights and civilian justice are virtually non-existent. Further the partition of Pashtun tribes through the Durand line in, the still valid border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, separated centuries old links between tribes and clans and inhibited trade between them. At last the decade long experiences of violence from several successive wars and conflicts, starting with the Anglo-Afghan wars and continuing with the Afghan-Soviet war, the civil war and the current war between the Taliban and the Afghan government and its allies, as well as between the Pakistani government and the Taliban, had a lasting impact on the development of the region and the militarization of the area. To be involved in armed conflict is a common experience in this region and becoming at least part of a tribal militia is a normal occurrence. Additionally, the strong religious influences through Wahabi influenced madrassas in this region since the Islamisation policies of Zia-ul-Huq during the Afghan-Soviet war have created a fertile ground for religious extremism. Further a reservoir for recruiting for Taliban militias was created, which is not in small part aided by civilian casualties from allied attacks on both sides of the Durand line.

The ongoing armed conflict, the strong alienation of the tribal population and the decades of developmental and economical neglect of the region by the Pakistani government have made an easy solution impossible. An integration of Waziristan into a functioning, democratic state Pakistan, an entity which is yet to emerge, is not likely in the future.

Solutions?

So how could the way out look like? Is there more than one way out? One thing must be made clear: There will be not effective military solution without simultaneous economic and social investments and there definitely will be no unilateral solution. A viable solution has to involve at least Afghanistan, the government of Pakistan, the U.S.-led allied forces and the Pashtun tribes on both sides of the Durand line. It may even has to include the Taliban. Further, every involved party has to make concessions.

One solution could be an agreement between the tribal groups in Waziristan and the government in Islamabad. This agreement could include a massive development and infrastructure program, targeting the elevation of living standards of the local population by producing jobs, for example in construction, as well as bringing the remote region closer to the economical and political centers of Pakistan. The idea behind this is to alleviate the wide-spread poverty in the region and to increase the trust into the central government. The tribal groups in return would have to ally themselves with the forces of the government against the Taliban, fighting their militias and exerting a stronger control over their youth, hindering them to join the Taliban militias. Further, such an agreement has to include a stop of drone attacks in the Waziristan region, and possibly in the whole area along the Durand line, so the collateral killings can be reduced or even stopped entirely. This scenario has several major flaws: First, Pakistan does not have the financial means to establish big development and infrastructure programs, especially in such an inaccessible area. Although financial aid could be given by the U.S. and possibly the European Union (EU), which could be problematic in the current financial crisis, the hiring of large numbers of professionals for such projects in these dangerous areas could be difficult. The second major flaw would be the sense of independence of the tribal groups which would conflict with an alignment to the central government in Islamabad. Along with the huge investments in the region, the central government certainly wants to increase its control over Waziristan, which would be easier, if the infrastructure would be enhanced massively. A persistent problem could be the U.S. drone policy. The success in killing major Taliban figures via drone attacks are is important factor in U.S. presidential politics. Neither the incumbent president Obama, nor the opposition candidate Romney would want to surrender such a relatively cheap method of gaining credibility in the 'War on Terror'. At last the role of Afghanistan in this scenario: In the past Pakistan has accused Afghan forces of crossing the border in pursuit of Taliban militias and several border

incidents have been reported, where Pakistani border forces were attacked from Afghanistan (most likely by Taliban or other local militias). In this scenario the Afghan security forces have to keep combatants from crossing the border and/ or attacking Pakistani forces. With the current government in Kabul and to future retreat of the ISAF forces from Afghanistan this would be an illusion. The sorry state of the Afghan Security Forces, especially in remote areas would forbid a secure border.

Another solution could be a 'cold exit' scenario: Pakistan makes an agreement with the Taliban, basically leaving the power to them and withdrawing its military to a few centers. This would basically confirm the current status and would certainly lead to the establishment of a Taliban-state in Waziristan. But it maybe also means a decline in terrorist incidents in the region and a decline in military casualties. A 'cold rationale' behind this could be to 'wait and lean back' while the various Taliban militias eliminate each other in power struggles (The Express Tribune, 23 July 2012). With the Taliban weakening themselves in power struggles, which would probably also lead to the alienation between the tribal establishments and the Taliban, as well as a decline in recruiting, the Pakistani military could re-enforce itself and the government in Islamabad could approach the tribal leaders to form an alliance to finally crush the Taliban militias. This scenario also has several flaws: Can any government sell such an agreement? Especially a civilian government of Pakistan could face a military coup on the grounds that the government failed and sold national sovereignty. Although, a subsequent military government could profit from the agreement, since it would not waste anymore soldiers and could still blame civilian government failure. Another major flaw would be the possibility of an all-out civil war where several Taliban factions, pitted against each other, would ally themselves with tribal militias. Or it could be the other way round and the Taliban factions overcome their hostilities and use the area as a base for further operations, for example into Afghanistan or other areas of FATA and the NWFP. Thirdly, the U.S. would certainly not stop their drone attacks to hit Taliban and Al-Kaida leaders, destabilizing the region further. And at last such a scenario does not include the surrounding areas in FATA.

The last scenario I want to present, and my favorite one, is a solution which may sound very farfetched: The establishment of an autonomous transnational region 'Pashtunistan'. The idea would be to give the Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand line autonomy without relinquishing sovereignty over these areas. This solution would not only include Waziristan, but all Pashtun inhabited areas in eastern Afghanistan and FATA and the

NWFP. While nominally remaining parts of Afghanistan or Pakistan respectively, the region would have an inner autonomy and limited local self-government. Such a scenario would need two events to start with: A federalization of Afghanistan and a Pakistani government willing to give up actual control in these areas. While the first point, a federalization of Afghanistan is inevitable after the withdrawal of the ISAF forces, Afghanistan is already broken up into different zones of control; the second point constitutes a major challenge. Any government of Pakistan would have huge problems in selling such an agreement. But back to the scenario: How is this scenario advantageous? First, it would be a 'divide et impera' strategy. The main rationale would be to strengthen Pashtun nationalism in opposition to expansionist Islamist Taliban politics. By giving the Pashtun tribes limited self-rule and making clear that they are in charge of their own internal affairs, nationalist leaders would certainly recognize the danger the Taliban militias constitute. It further would divide the nationalist factions, now fighting with the Taliban against foreign occupation, from the jihadist factions. To realize this scenario an autonomous transnational region 'Pashtunistan' would need support in institution-building, infrastructure construction and economic development. As an entity which has experiences with transnational regions, for example the Oresund region, is the EU which could help establish institutions, fund infrastructure projects and could act as an 'honest broker' between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Also the past involvements of the EU in Bosnia and the Kosovo would qualify the EU to help in such a scenario. The main task for the EU would be the training of local government professionals and of local police forces, as well as the construction of main highways to connect the Pashtun areas on both sides of the Durand line. Since the region would fall under the nominal sovereignty of two different states the EU could work as mediator and caretaker, mediating between the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Further, the EU could negotiate with the U.S. to end the drone attacks on behalf of 'Pashtunistan', binding the nationalists to its agenda and building credibility with these factions. While nominally remaining parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan respectively, both states would relegate most administrative and legal functions to the local government level and retain only symbolic functions. Inhabitants of 'Pashtunistan' would ideally carry dual citizenship as citizens of their respective state and of the transnational region, thus building a sense of belonging to both, their Pashtun homeland and the states they are living in. What are the implications of such a scenario? On the one hand, it could stabilize the region by giving the Pashtun tribes responsibility over their own fate, which could alleviate the sense of neglect they have experienced in

the past, especially in Pakistan. By splitting the forces in the area in pro-nationalist and pro-Taliban, the Taliban forces would probably be weakened considerably, since the tribal loyalties and nationalist motivations would prevail over jihadist motives. Pakistan could withdraw its strong military presence to a few bases and end the costly war in the area without losing nominal control and their national integrity. Afghanistan could be stabilized as a federal state, after the withdrawal of the ISAF forces, preventing ethnic clashes. The assistance of the EU as the 'honest broker' could not only mediate conflicts between Afghanistan and Pakistan, but could also steer Pashtuns away from extremist influence from outside. On the other hand, a government of Pakistan, regardless if civilian or military, would have huge problems justifying such an agreement. The ideological pillar of Pakistan as a homeland of Muslims in South Asia could be undermined, even if the Pakistani areas would remain under Pakistani sovereignty. Also such a scenario could be a strong argument for a stronger federalization of Pakistan in the eyes of separatist movements in Balochistan and elsewhere, weakening the central government in Islamabad. In Afghanistan the central government of the Karzai regime could be a problem, since it would limit their influence even more. Additionally, Kabul would be situated directly in the new emerging 'Pashtunistan'. The other regions of Afghanistan would probably not have much difficulty with such a solution, as long as they receive equal autonomy. Further, such a scenario would not guarantee a decline of Taliban militias. If they adapt themselves to the situation and become a religio-nationalist force, abandoning their jihadi agenda, they could very well prevail as a regional political power. Moreover the border has to be more or less abolished to ensure intra-regional trade and movement. Nevertheless, the advantages of such a solution are undeniable: By acknowledging the regional identity of the Pashtuns and granting them self-government in Afghanistan and Pakistan and connecting the Pashtun areas on both sides of the Durand line, re-establishing centuries old traditional links, the inhabitants of the region could be convinced of orientating towards a peaceful development. Constituting a transnational region which remains part of Afghanistan and Pakistan respectively, could accommodate the respective governments' fear of sedition. Both states, Afghanistan and Pakistan would profit in terms of security, since the Pashtun tribes would have less reasons to fight the central governments for more independence. Further, through the re-established links, in case of free trade in the transnational region, Pakistan and Afghanistan could also profit economically. The autonomy could strengthen the Pashtun national identity and could make Pashtuns more content with their political situation, drawing potential political power

away from the religious extremists like the Taliban. Last, but not least, the EU would be perfect in assisting in institution building, since it has had past experiences in administrating and assisting in conflict areas and has already established transnational regions within its own structures.

Alternatively, this scenario could also work with Turkey being the mediator and 'honest broker'. Considering the same assumptions as above, the role of the EU would be fulfilled by Turkey, preferably in cooperation with the EU. Other than the EU, which member states are involved in the military conflict in Afghanistan via ISAF, Turkey, although providing security in Kabul and training to Afghan Security Forces, has not been directly involved in combat operations and can thus be considered more 'neutral'. The fact that it has a Muslim majority population would certainly add to Turkey's credibility as chaperon for 'Pashtunistan' and as a mediator between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Turkey would still be in need of financial and organizational support from the EU, especially relying on the EU's experience with reconstruction programs and administration of conflict affected regions. However, Turkey has had some success with direct humanitarian aid in Somalia (Foreign Policy, 24 April 2012), proving some capabilities to conduct such operations.

Conclusions

None of the above mentioned scenarios is a short term solution, except for the relatively unrealistic 'cold exit' strategy. Especially the last scenario, regardless if realized through EU involvement or Turkey's involvement, is a solution for an intermediate future at best. However, the 'Pashtunistan' scenario is, in my opinion, most adept to provide a long term solution for Waziristan and the wider Pashtun region. Further, it may even have a stabilizing effect on Afghanistan and could take pressure of the conflict in Pakistan's tribal areas. Considering the length of the conflict, more than three decades now, and the probability of the conflict lasting at least three decades more, a few years of preparation for a 'Pashtunistan' solution seem acceptable. The most important lesson is, however, that a solution must be multilateral and, paradoxically, the U.S. have to end their direct involvement in the region as a stabilizing effort. Additionally, whether Turkey takes up the task of being the 'honest broker' or not, the EU, as a supranational entity, has to be prepared to get involved, either directly or to support Turkey's efforts. As for Pakistan: Any government, may it be civilian or military, must recognize the fact, that they do not possess the abilities to bring the region under central control. Their approach to make

singular alliances with tribals or to appease the Taliban have failed. So did their attempts of armed solutions. So Pakistan might have to turn towards less conventional solutions.

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